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SUBJECT: WATER USERS ASSOCIATIONS FARMERS PRACTICE GRASS ROOTS
DEMOCRACY

DUSHANBE 00000306 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) Summary: Assistance Coordinator for Europe Dan Rosenblum visited USAID-supported Water Users' Associations (WUAs) during a recent visit to Tajikistan. The WUAs are already known as assistance success stories in Central Asia. They have organized farmers to cooperate in meeting their irrigation and drinking water needs; they have contributed to community development and helped demonstrate democracy in action. Farmers in the associations have seen their income increase and they have gained the experience and confidence to tackle additional community problems and to work with government. Women, too, are playing their role. The associations' success is now generating broader interest among Tajiks in forming such associations. Traditional democracy promotion is difficult in Central Asia, which makes programs such as this with its powerful collateral impact especially important. Success takes time, so sustained support will be needed to continue to spread and grow the WUA program. End Summary.

¶2. (U) During a recent visit to Tajikistan, Assistance Coordinator for Europe Dan Rosenblum visited representatives from ten water users associations formed along the length of the Rohati canal. The visit demonstrated why the water users associations are a real success story in Central Asia. The five associations from the more remote, downstream areas of the canal were more experienced with association operations. When they originally formed, the canal in their area was so deteriorated that they received little or no water most of the year. When advisors came and spoke to them about organizing to make canal repairs and try to restore water supplies, the response was enthusiastic and a village meeting drew high participation. With the support of advisors, the groups were organized in a highly participatory and transparent process that engendered confidence and encouraged participation. The use of a secret ballot to elect association officers was the key tactic that they credit with ensuring that the right people were put in charge.

¶3. (U) Representatives described the many results of the work of the association. Villagers have now taken ownership of the canal and irrigation system organizing themselves to do routine maintenance, cleaning, and repairs. With increased awareness and ownership, the water was kept cleaner and safer for drinking purposes as well. They had an officially registered group through which to address the government and as such were able to get some official response. They were able to collect fees and self-finance some operations, because with published budgets and priorities set in group meeting, contributors knew what they were getting for their money. Perhaps most importantly, the increased availability of water improved harvests and on average they said households of association members had doubled their income.

¶4. (U) With farmers now organized, the associations did not limit their activity only to irrigation and water issues. They were engaging in joint procurement of seeds and fertilizer and taking on other projects. The associations average about 15-20% female membership and have active women's committees. These committees organized income generating activities like sewing shops, taught courses on food preservation, and organized village education and entertainment programs.

¶5. (U) Budget constraints early in the program prevented outreach to the farmers on the foremost part of the canal who were closer to the intake. Also, because these farmers generally had better water supplies, they had less incentive to take on the responsibilities of water users associations. The benefits experienced by their less well placed neighbors nonetheless made an impression. Some organized and asked for advice in forming their own associations. This was enthusiastically agreed to by the existing associations, which can expect further benefits if the neighbors also contribute to managing the canal. The older associations have agreed to mentor the newer ones and offer their experience with formal registration and other matters. All have agreed to form a federation to increase cooperation among the associations along the canal. Together, the 10 associations will serve more than 3,400 hectares of irrigated land along the 53 kilometer canal, and although the actual association members number just over 600, about 50,000 people are estimated to benefit from their activity.

¶6. (U) Comment: At a meeting Rosenblum attended, representatives of all ten associations were together for the first time, but

DUSHANBE 00000306 002.2 OF 002

among members from both old and new associations, there was a palpable sense of empowerment--that they could work together to solve some of the problems facing them. The agricultural benefits in improvement to food security and income were clear, but so was the support for basic democratic concepts of transparency, inclusion, consensus and responsibility, and self reliance. It has proven difficult to get clear results with traditional democracy programs in Central Asia, but the water users association model has shown how local grass roots organizations directly focused on people's daily practical problems can introduce basic concepts of democracy in clear and useful ways.

¶7. These programs are no by no means an overnight success, and the active associations today are the result of five to eight years of patient support through programs adjusted over time to take into account lessons learned. They are now clearly bearing fruit as interest grows in forming such associations in more and more areas throughout Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. The way associations work is a big change from traditional and Soviet practice and continued advice and guidance will continue to be needed to help the movement spread until a stronger base of local knowledge is available to support new associations. End Comment.
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